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Maranon Essentials Kitten

I was shopping for a boyfriend I don't even have when I stumbled across the kitten.

I'd spent fifteen minutes scrolling through the options under *Gifts For Him*. The suggestions all seemed similar: colognes, leather wallets, corny t-shirts. I couldn't buy any of this stuff. I'd be too ashamed to give someone a shirt that says *Home of The Red, White, & Brew*.

I tried to think of what kind of gift *I* would want. I always liked something heartfelt — something original, something slightly different, something affordable. I realized I wasn't going to find a good deal on anything sweet or unique, so I decided to go back to shopping for some essentials. I needed more toothpaste, and I also needed to buy some conditioner. Fortunately for me, Maranon — the shopping site I always use — has its own line of cheapo health and beauty products. They market these as Maranon Essentials.

By buying the Essentials-branded products, I could pay less for things like mouthwash and toilet paper. I didn't really think twice about doing this, mostly because the stuff was decent enough. The toilet paper might be 0.5 ply, and the bristles on the toothbrushes might be too hard, but I could make things work — especially when I reminded myself how much money I was saving. The people at Maranon were really helping me survive on a meager budget. So when I saw the Maranon Essentials Kitten, I felt like I had to buy one. It was such a good deal.

The Maranon Essentials Kitten was an eight-week old kitten. It weighed two pounds, and it came with six cans of cat food, so its first few meals would be covered. If I spent one hundred more dollars, they would go ahead and spay or neuter the kitten. I decided to pay a little extra for a properly-spayed kitten, because I'm trying to be more considerate and more ethical with my purchases, even though it's admittedly hard to do. I also believe in animal welfare, so I figured I ought to get the poor thing fixed. Spend money up front to save money down the road, you know? I can only afford to feed one kitten, anyway — no mother cats for me!

The day the kitten arrived, I was happy to see they'd delivered the brown tabby and not the orange one. Several people in the reviews complained about receiving a kitten that was the wrong color or pattern. One person even got a cat instead of a kitten — and they posted several pictures alongside an angry review. But I had nothing to complain about. My kitten was perfect. It *did* try to bark once, but I knew that occasional glitches and hitches were pretty standard. And it also tried to bite me, but its teeth weren't really sharp. Come to think of it, it doesn't seem to have teeth *or* claws. That's probably why they sent cans of pâté instead of shreds.

I like the kitten so far, though. It seems pretty typical, just like a regular cat. It's been so long since I've lived with a cat. My parents had one, back when I was in grade school, but we picked him up at the animal shelter.

The animal shelter was a place where abandoned pets stayed until they were picked by a person or family. The shelters were full of older dogs and cats, mostly. I wonder, do they even have those kinds of shelters

anymore? I don't really know. I went online to buy all of the pets I've had.

And I've only ever bought kittens or puppies. I just can't help it — I only buy new things. I can't imagine buying something pre-owned. It just doesn't seem cool or sophisticated — and I'm just trying to live my best life. I've got to be fair to *me,* you know?

The White Skunk

My sister told me she'd seen an enormous cat running through the garden. The fat tabby had slipped under the netting wrapped around the uneven rows of tomatoes and bell peppers. He wasn't interested in the plants—he

was most interested in the baby bird that happened to be panicking on the soft garden soil.

The bird's open wings and little round body made him look like a flower—a squawking flower. All around the bird, cherry tomatoes rolled around. Some were overripe, some were half-eaten by bugs, but all of them were red. The little tomatoes looked like drops of blood. But the bird wasn't bleeding—its wing was obviously broken, but the bird was intact.

By the time I pulled on some gardening gloves, the bird had squeezed inside one of the tomato cages. I pushed the cat back and reached through the wires and the mesh. I pulled out the bird, a nervous ball of fluff and feathers.

At that point, I realized I didn't know what to do. This was the first time I'd rescued anything, and I didn't know what I was supposed to do.

I decided to wing it. That's what I'd always done.

Miraculously, the bird lived. Because the bird lived, I felt like I'd been given a special gift: the ability to help animals in need.

When I realized that I wanted to start helping animals, I didn't gravitate toward the same animals everyone else wanted to protect. Cats and dogs—there were so many other people around to save them. I had my sights set on forgotten creatures—*critters*. I wanted to help foxes, and raccoons, and the nasty beetles that ate the farmers' corn. I wanted to move snakes and snapping turtles out of the road. I wanted to put wooly worms and caterpillars and tiny frogs back in trees.

The first time I saw the white skunk, I knew what I wanted to do with my life. I wanted to claim it, to snatch it up, to raise it as my own. I wanted to protect it from the rest of the world, because it was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

The white skunk wasn't entirely white. It was black on the feet and the snout. I thought it was less cute than the skunks that were mostly

black—but it had its own charm. It lived in the woods behind my house, and it seemed just like a fairytale creature, like one of Cinderella's pets or Bambi's friends. It was chubby and its fur looked soft. I just *needed* to touch that cotton candy fur!

I decided to set a humane trap. I'd put peanut butter and crackers on a plate inside a cage and wait for the door to snap shut behind him. After thinking about it for a moment, I realized I didn't know how I'd get him back out. I felt anxious, even though I hadn't set the trap yet. I'd already started smothering the crackers with peanut butter, and while I thought about what to do, I ate some of the skunk's snack.

The state's fish and wildlife webpage said that I could throw a quilt over the cage to make him less nervous, and once he quit chittering, I'd be able to slide the front of the trap open. Scrolling down the page, I found similar advice about trapping raccoons, possums, and groundhogs. The instructions emphasized catching and relocating the animals, or even calling animal control. Every single section advised against keeping any of these animals as pets.

I still didn't know what to do. I knew what I *should* do, and I knew what I *wanted* to do. Turning a skunk into a pet was a bad idea, but I could settle for just putting my hands on that fur. I wanted to know if it felt as soft and wispy as thistledown. I wanted to bury my fingers in it, or brush it, and pet it over and over again. Or maybe twice. Just to say that I'd felt it.

I decided that I could leave the peanut butter and crackers on the back porch, out in the open. I would sit near the plate and—ever so gently—reach out to pet him, after he'd stuffed himself. He was plump, so I figured I would make a big portion. I also made a couple extra for myself. I figured I'd dine with him.

After sitting on the porch for an hour, I decided that he wasn't coming tonight. It was nearly midnight, and the heat of the day had dissipated. Other animals—two baby possums and a big raccoon—skirted the corner of the yard, but they didn't move far from the woods. They didn't come near me or the plate of food.

I was about to give up when I heard the owl hooting. I looked up in the great sassafras tree closest to the yard. She seemed as big and as loud as a man—she cast an impressive shadow over the backyard, and it seemed like she would envelop me in her darkness. I loved her, and I felt like she could be my new friend. I wondered if I could trap an owl, even as it felt like she was trapping me.

I watched her without blinking —I couldn't look away from something so lovely. She was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. She was big and beautiful and perfect. Even with the white fur and the bloody mess at her feet, she was gorgeous.

Give Me Space

When I was in elementary school, my parents bought me a book about astronomy— the night sky, the planets, the solar system. I fell in love with the outer planets and the most distant stars. I was fascinated with the diamond rain on Neptune, and I read up on the blue giants. But I was most fascinated by the moon, because I saw it every night. It was more familiar. It felt like a friend.

In second grade, our class was assigned to do a presentation on a planet or another celestial body. There were probably about a dozen of us kids, and I imagine those who didn't write about a planet got to write about comets or asteroids. I wanted to write about the moon, but the teacher told me to write about Mars instead.

This was when I was seven, the age where I would sit in class and pick at the hair gel that had dried on my head earlier that morning. I was an odd kid, and I was aware that I was different— but I was also super sensitive. I could *be* weird, but I would get upset if someone *called me*

weird, if I felt judged, if I felt slighted. I cried when my best friend was assigned to write about the moon. But the teacher had asked me to write about Mars, so I would have to get familiar with another part of the solar system. I would have to familiarize myself with something new. I would have to trace a new orbit.

Mars was alien to me. My parents took me to the supermarket, so that we could buy something for my presentation—poster board, markers, and a little red ball. When we bought that red ball, I told myself that I would learn to like Mars. Mars was a new toy, after all—or it would be, after the presentation was over. This second, smaller Mars probably lives on—as a deflated plastic shell—in my parent's garage or shed.

I liked Mars well enough, but it didn't have diamond rain, or rings, or even martians.

A year ago, Mars reached its perihelion on my birthday. Mars seemed closer than ever before. My old friend, somehow moving in sync with me.

Venus was once my favorite planet to spot late at night or early in the morning. Now, more often than not, I find myself looking for Saturn. I had developed a new obsession, even though I always liked the outer planets.

Around 2010 or 2011, I often listened to “My Girls,” the bouncy, electrifying Animal Collective song. The song sampled recordings from the Cassini space probe. The idea of collaborating with a planet (and a satellite) was mesmerizing—a gas giant with a songwriting credit.

Which planet is the most creative? Which planet is the most destructive? Why do I get the feeling that I live on the most calamitous planet?

When I first started looking for Saturn in the night sky, I would face the wrong direction. I would find myself looking at Jupiter instead.

I didn't really know what I should be looking for. I only knew that I needed to be looking for something bigger than myself.

I finally found it. It was visible, even though it was 800 million miles away. It was just across the way, somewhere near Aquarius— right where it was supposed to be.

Stragglers

In my neighborhood, there's a gas station that's been closed for ten years. The sign over the glass doors says *chips—snacks—juice—cigarettes—cold drinks*. But the only thing you can buy there now is meth. There are always cars out front, old Dodge Neons and new Dodge Challengers, and there are even more people wandering around on foot. Someone is always coming and going.

Whenever I stepped outside, I worried about looking too good—even when I knew I looked terrible. What I mean is, I didn't want to look too clean and get approached for money. I didn't even have money to spare. I was downwardly mobile—already poor and getting poorer all the time.

My mistake was that I'd never learned a trade. I'd worked in stores and offices and even down at the country club, but I never found anything that suited me. I wished I'd had more stability, like folks had fifty or sixty years ago. My grandfather, he'd had it made. He'd had the same job for forty-two years.

This was after the war, when the soldiers came home and got good jobs in the factories. Some went North, like my other grandfather, but others went farther South. Being in a good union meant that my granddad

could take his crane-operating talents to South Beach. But my grandfather's machine was complicit in the destruction of the Everglades, in the destruction of a pluperfect paradise.

My dad grew up in a town called Fox Creek, right on the north side of the wetlands. The actual Fox Creek wasn't so much a creek as it was a canal, which carried water (and creatures, living and dead) all the way down to the ocean. My dad would walk along the canal and shoot at water moccasins, stirring their nests and sending them scurrying up into someone else's backyard.

Life in Florida came with its hazards and its biohazards. My dad still has to get spots burnt off every so often, from all the time he spent in the tropical sun. In my mind, the animals and the sun were *nothing* compared to the people. The people were the real threat.

Dad's best friends, Charles and Dan, were also from Florida. They all lived in the business end of Florida. But their friendship ended when Charles got a little too wild. It was at Dan's wedding—his first wedding, to the lady who'd be his first *and* third wife. Charles leapt into a canal—a different canal, the C-6 Canal—during the reception. He splashed and screamed and showed out. Never mind the alligators and the runoff—he didn't care.

He wasn't afraid of anything. But I knew he was from one of the most frightening families in Boynton Beach, from a family that probably wrestled gators and rode manatees. I knew who they were, even though I grew up in a different state, in a safer corner of the world.

I grew up fearing Florida. I never wanted to go back. The hurricanes and the wildlife, that was bad enough. But I suspected Florida wanted to keep her worst secrets—and I always wanted to mind my own business. I was even afraid of the glass-bottom boats. I couldn't understand why people wanted to see things that ought to be hidden underwater.

I had no desire to visit our family and friends (and family friends) in Florida. The past was meant to be buried under the waves of the past, buried under the white sands of time. I wanted to leave it alone, unexcavated.

I also worried that Florida might grab me by the ankles and drag me backwards into the ocean. I imagine that I would get lost or lose the last good parts of myself. I worried that I would wake up on the beach without my wallet or my sanity.

The truth is, I'd already started to lose my mind. I found myself growing disinterested in everything. I wanted to live, but life felt empty. Life was just a series of moments between working and doing chores. I loathed deadlines, washing machines, recipes, car maintenance. I hated making

phone calls. I hated scheduling *anything*. I hated being bound by my forty-hour work week. When I thought about my own relationship to working, I felt despair.

Every weekday morning, I would play something called The Box Game with my big cat.

Let me explain The Box Game *after* I explain the big cat. The big cat is not big in the way that one normally thinks of a big cat—an obese tabby. My big cat. Oversized, tall, long-faced. He has sparkling black fur, like the dog from the Wings song. *Jet!*

My cat was big, but he wasn't very intimidating. He was a big bowl of pudding. He was an overgrown kitten. He loved to nestle down in an empty Amazon box. He understood that those boxes were a safe haven—a place to hide from the rest of the world, even though the rest of his world was a small apartment in Tennessee.

Now, The Box Game was a game the cat and I ended up playing almost by accident. One morning, he tried to nose his way in while I was brushing my teeth. At his full height—standing on his hind legs—he reached well above the doorknob. With minimal effort, he'd pushed the door completely open—and he stood there, looking embarrassed. I was only brushing my teeth, but I realized he thought I was in my own

Amazon box. He thought I'd needed to rest, to shut the lid for a moment. He walked away, not even bothering to look over his shoulder.

He knew that my box time was *mine*. But what he didn't know was that, all day long, I was trapped in other boxes of varying sizes.

The car was the metal box that took me to a big, boxy building. My desk area was a box-shaped cubicle, with three laminate panels that kept me fenced in. And the fake work personality I'd crafted was the sturdiest box of all. It was invisible, but it was always present.

I found that, if I wanted to fit in with the people at my office, I had to accommodate the feelings of the people I worked with. I worked, for the most part, with men who weren't open-minded, who seemed more than slightly agitated by the thought of working with a thirty-year-old woman.

My little sister had told me she figured it would be easier working for a man in an office, but that was because she'd worked in places like daycares and salons, which drew both catty *and* holier-than-thou types. I never had a hard time getting along with women, and I wished I could find a less *bro*-y industry.

My manager made me dread coming in every morning. He could make an educated person feel inarticulate. I learned to ignore my manager's

most finicky feedback, to be moderately friendly with the people who seemed amenable, and to carefully gray-rock everyone else.

I was one of the only workers who didn't have a nameplate, even though I'd already been there two years. I wondered if I never got a nameplate because they thought I'd eventually get married, *like women do*, and that I'd end up changing my last name. I also wondered if they'd simply counted on me leaving. It was a silly thing to get worked up about, but it still annoyed me. Because of not having a nameplate out as a reference, I was often addressed as *Mia*, not *Maya*.

"Mia, could you make some more coffee?"

"Mia, do you know if we have a meeting at 1:00?"

*"*Maya*, you may as well go ahead and quit your job and come on down to Florida …"*

That moment opened my eyes. When I finally heard someone say my name the right way, even though she'd only known me for five minutes, I knew it was time to jump ship.

But I'm getting ahead of myself now.

For now, let me make it clear that I'd reached my breaking point. I was already ready to quit, and I finally had an opportunity to leap.

It started when Evelyn—*Eva*—called me on my lunch break, when she told me that I ought to come back to Florida. As disgusting as the thought of going to Florida was, I realized that everything else in my life disgusted me.

Every day, I'd been balancing on the blade of a knife. I hated my manager's smarmy attitude, I hated the stale office air, and I hated my thirty-minute lunch breaks. I hated not having any freedom for more than half of the day, every day.

I thought about how much I'd wanted to give up. I thought of how much I'd wanted to win the lottery. That had been my only plan. Instead of going through the exhausting process of searching for a new job, I had decided to concentrate really hard on winning the Mega Millions. It seemed easier, and far less painful than getting my feelings hurt by going on fruitless interviews.

In my fantasy world, I would find out that I'd won the lottery while I was sitting at work. I would check the numbers over and over again. I wouldn't say anything. I would just get up and walk out. I would never clean out my desk, or never return any calls, or pick my coat up off the

hook on the wall behind my desk. I would just leave and never come back.

It turned out that I didn't need the Mega Millions. Evelyn Murphy—*Eva*—was my lottery. I could quit my job and flee to Florida. (Just temporarily, because I had no intention of staying in such a wild place.) Eva had a trip to go on—but it was a journey that would be better to take with someone else.

Eva was persuasive, sure, but I already made my mind up. I had to get out, to take a break, to move on to something else. Even if it was all uncertain. The sameness of everyday life was eating me up.

I looked down at my empty sandwich wrapper—the foil paper I'd started to ball up in my fist. I'd spent so long on the phone that I'd had to eat everything in three bites. I thought about the nauseating cheeseburger I'd just wolfed down, and about how the cheese smelled more like warm lunchroom milk than like an actual slice of cheddar. I almost retched.

I couldn't keep living like this. Half-existing. Florida was awful, but *this* was even worse. Pain was preferable to sinking deeper into complacency.

"I'll meet you somewhere in north Florida," I said. "Panama City."

“That’s a long way from home, for me. Why do you want to meet there?”

“So I can turn around quickly if I feel like leaving.”

“Oh, Maya. How about we meet somewhere a little closer? Orlando, maybe?”

“You call me next week, and tell me which town to meet you in. But we’ll have to take your car the rest of the way.”

“Okay, big mama,” she said, and hung up before I could figure out if she was insulting me, or if she was just being like her granddad.

I dropped my cat off at my sister’s house the day after I quit my job.

“You’re taking the Fiero on a roadtrip?” she asked. “You trust that old thing?”

“Yep, I said, and that was that.

I got on the interstate and drove for seven hours. I only took two breaks— once to gas up and go to the bathroom, once to throw up on the side of the road.

It all really started with the phone call. I would've left my job, eventually, but Evelyn pushed me to act. She gave me permission to breathe. She helped me disassemble my box by giving me a new project.

I could focus on getting *this*, then, and then gain some confidence. If I could do *this*, then I could do anything.

I'm about to get ahead of myself, again. Let me tell you about what Eva'd asked me to do.

"Maya Moran?" Eva said. No *hello*. "You don't know me, Maya, but my granddad went to school with your—"

"My dad?" I said. "I know. It was Charles, right? I'm not trying to cut you off, but you don't have to tell me. I already know all about the fraternity. The falling out, too. You're not going to hurt my feelings."

"And I don't intend on it. I just wanted you and your dad to get that jacket back. And I want my grandmother's ring back."

"*What* jacket?"

"There," she said. "*There's* something you didn't know. I'm surprised you already know about the ring."

“I’ve heard about the ring,” I said. “*Everybody’s* heard about the ring. It’s the ring that was stolen before the wedding, wasn’t it?”

“It was stolen from my granddad *and* my grandma. It was going to be my grandma’s wedding ring.”

Evelyn was named after both of her grandmothers, who serendipitously happened to have the same name. She rarely answered to Evelyn. She preferred *Eve* and *Eva*. Before I knew all of this, I’d called her Evelyn, but she told me that I had to call her Eva.

“Eva and Maya,” she said. “Partners in crime.”

“Crime?” I asked.

“Crime and other pursuits. How would you like to come on a road trip with me? We have an opportunity to go to a nice event in Boynton Beach, and I think we have a window of opportunity to retrieve our heirlooms.”

“I’m not breaking in anywhere,” I said.

“We don’t have to do *that*. The rightful owners of these items have a wonderful opportunity to present themselves and ask if we can have—”

“What are you talking about? What opportunity? An estate sale?”

“No. It’s a party. They’ll turn me away, Maya, if I go alone. They won’t turn *you* away. I think Dan’s family still likes you and yours.”

“Daniel Davies?” I said. “You think they like me?”

“You *and* your family,” Eva said. “Think about it. You could come down to sunny Florida and—”

“No,” I said. “The sun here is good enough for me. A Tennessee sunset is just as good as a Florida sunset. The sun doesn’t even set over the water, either place.”

“Over Lake Okeechobee it does. It sets over the far side of the lake. And it’s beautiful. You would know that, if you came home more often.”

“Home,” I laughed. “It’s not my home. I’m a country girl.”

“*Awwww*, no,” she said. “Who says a country girl wouldn’t be at home here, too?”

“You have the unchecked confidence of a— a person who’s never been anxious,” I said. “You can say *anything* and sound happy saying it. And

you don't worry about everything, like I do. You worry about nothing, because you'll always find a way out."

"Maya," she said. She didn't sound irritated. She sounded happy, as if she'd been working at Disney for years, as if she couldn't un-Imagineer herself. "If it's money that's stopping you —"

"It is!" I snapped. "I know you don't know what it's like to have to crawl back to Tennessee with your tail tucked between your legs. *My* family has always had to do things like that, and I don't have much. I've never had a safety net."

"Most people don't," Eva said. "But I can tell you something about the Davies family. There's nothing rich people — *really* rich people — love more than pretending to understand the 'less fortunate.' Pardon the expression. I hate it, too. Anyhow, they love pretending to be nice by taking a gullible poor person under their wing."

"Is that what you want to do to me? Abduct me? Suffocate me under one of your wings?"

"Abduct you? No," Eva said. "I'm not doing that. I'm giving you a chance to help me out. We can play everything up to her grandfather, to tell him we need the ring, the money for the ring, or else we'll escalate things."

“You mean pressing charges? Isn’t there some sort of statute of limitations?”

“Baby, you think those are the *only* bad things that man has done? I’ve done a lot of research. And I know some things that are more than hearsay.”

“You’re going to blackmail the whole family?” I asked.

“No. Besides, they already know that a lot of people know salacious things — within their inner circle, I mean. And there’s no point in going to the police. If I hang them out to dry, I’m going on the Internet. I want *everyone* to know. The police won’t do anything, but his business associates might kill him. He’s more afraid of his employees than he is of the police.”

I didn’t say anything else. I just listened.

“Now, Maya, we need to butter up the granddaughter. That’s Jelina Davies-Landreau. We need her to think that she’s doing something kind by helping you. Get in her good graces, and maybe her granddad will act like we’re back in his.”

“I was never out of their good graces. It was *your* family who messed up.” I kept my tone even. I didn’t want to insult her, but I wanted her to know I wasn’t a fool.

It was true, anyway, and she knew it. Her granddad was the one who ran past the armed guards at the wedding-of-the-century. He was the one who started shoving groomsmen in the canal, laughing and screaming and —

“Don’t act precious about any of this,” Eva said. “It’s a miracle your dad didn’t end up with liver failure, like mine did. Dad and Granddad both got eaten up by the magic elixir.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. “My cousin got completely messed up — between the drinking and the meth — and he lost our family farm. And then he died. So … I know how … how it can be. I’m sorry.”

“I’m sorry, too,” she said. “A farm is a lot of work. You can’t afford to rest. Hell, that’s how he probably got addicted in the first place — you need something to help keep your eyes open, to keep your wings flapping. But my granddad had a parachute, and he knew when to use it. Except at the end. He couldn’t let go of the bottle long enough to pull the strings on the parachute. That’s why I don’t drink. I don’t want to add to my family’s misery. Everyone’s always drunk, except for me.”

“Really?”

“*Really*.”

“So you’re doing it for them? Not staying sober for you, but for them? You really care about your family. That’ll be a star in your crown in the eyes of the Lord,” I said.

“A star in my crown?” Eva said. “You must be mistaken. They won’t let someone as mean as me into Heaven. And I wouldn’t even look good in a crown.”

“Eva, I don’t think you’re half as bad as me. I’ve learned to hide how mean I am. And I think that’s a bigger sin.”

“Well. I admit that I’m surprised by you,” she said. “You’re willing to be honest. You admit that you can be mean. So I need you on my team. We need to meet up with Jelina, and we can’t back down. But I have a good feeling about this. After she spends ten minutes listening to you, she’ll hand us the ring on a silver platter.”

I agreed to meet Eva in Orlando. We would spend a week getting ready to meet Jelina, and then we’d show up at her family’s party.

We would bring gifts—new gifts, gifts that weren't stolen. No replacement rings. Champagne. Wine glasses. A bouquet, too, maybe. We would make amends, somehow, and convince her that it was only right to help us.

We arrived at the Davies mansion on a Saturday morning, because Eva said the party started fairly early and would last all night.

We ended up taking my Fiero, even though her S-Class Mercedes was newer, nicer, and ran better. We decided it would give the Davies family a better picture of me and "my situation." Even though it wasn't a *dishonest* move, it still felt manipulative. I realized that I didn't really care, though— and so we drove my car up to the security window of the gated community.

"We're working the event," Eva said. "We're helping with the decorating."

I shrugged and nodded, and the man in the box waved us through.

"Where should we park?" I asked. I shouldn't have bothered wondering— there were white vans parked down a side street. Catering vans, a box truck filled with white folding chairs, all manner of party-stuff.

I parked behind one, right at the corner. We got out and started our long walk up to the mansion.

Everything — from the corner of the boulevard to the ornate iron gate — was covered in white and gold and green. *Some event,* I thought. There were golden balloons and little chalkboard signs, festooned with little rosettes made of silk georgette.

I stopped to read one of the signs. *Davies-Landreau and Stewart*. It dawned on me that this was an exclusive event — an event I'd almost certainly not been invited to.

"A *wedding*? A *big* wedding?" I hissed. "And her grandfather is right here? You knew all about this, Eva. You knew it was a wedding all along, and you didn't even hint at it."

"You never asked," she said.

I felt stupid, *so* stupid, and I faltered.

"Oh, man. Oh, *man*. You're gonna get us in trouble again."

"*You* are going to be the one who gets us in trouble for the first time, if you don't calm down. The guys unloading the cake are already looking.

Ahhh, Maya. You knew we were headed to the house on the canal, goofy girl," she said. "You think we'd be able to avoid dredging up the past, anyway? That's what we're here for. An unpleasant conversation."

I hung back a little, and then looked up at the house itself. I couldn't figure out whether the roof was made of clay tiles or sheet metal rolled to look like clay tiles. I didn't know which one was sturdier, which one was more expensive. I was completely out of my depth. I was intimidated by everything, even the roof.

"It's—it's a beautiful home," I said, because I realized I had nothing else to say, and because I suspected our voices carried up to the people behind the gate. Eva was right. They kept looking at us and pointing down to the corner, pointing in the direction of the Fiero. "I have to assume living on the canal is safer. With all the hurricanes and floods, I mean."

"It's bold of you to assume it's safer anywhere, Maya. The world has never been a safe place. Even here, with the guard dogs and gardeners."

She sneered at the big house, at all of the bows and flowers. She was just like her grandfather. I admired her, and I also felt like I was going to die from the pit growing in my stomach.

“But you knew all about this? Didn’t you?” I whispered, because the people kept watching, and because several of them moved closer to the gate. The big gate and the sidewalk separated us from a phone call to the police and trespassing charges. Eva didn’t seem concerned, of course. She started smiling and waving.

“Eva, you knew this was a wedding. I’m not—I’m not taking any rings from a *bride*.”

“Who said you’re going to take that ring? I am. Besides, it’s better than kissing it. You don’t want to do that, do you?”

“No,” I said. I was afraid of these people, but I also hated them. I hated them for stealing in the past. I hated them for looking down on us in the present. “*No*.”

“Great. *I* will take the ring, and you will get rid of it, because I don’t have the heart to get rid of a ring that was stolen from my grandmother. If she were alive, I would give it back to her, but—it’s best to get rid of it. I don’t want them to have it. That’s the most important thing. I just want it gone.”

“What?” I said. “You don’t want to keep—”

“I can’t let them win *this time*. We can’t let them win this time.”

So this was it— our chance to ruin another Davies wedding. Ten years ago, I would’ve balked at the idea. Two weeks ago, I would’ve protested. But now— seeing how insulated and sheltered they were— I didn’t care about ruining *any* weddings. They could always afford another wedding. They could afford a whole harem’s worth of weddings.

He would never let us in, of course—the grandfather, Dan Davies. He approached the fence and he recognized us on sight. We looked too much like the men who came before us.

He wanted to call us nasty names, I’m almost certain, but he held back. He looked at Eva, he looked at me, and he offered us a hundred dollars each to leave. Eva scoffed.

“*Two* hundred, then,” he said.

“No way,” she said, grinning up at him. “I won’t leave for less than five thousand. Moran won’t leave for less than eight. She’s meaner than she looks.”

He glanced back at me. I glared at him.

"… ladies, I don't have my checkbook on hand, but—"

"Then step inside and get it. We can wait." I turned to Eva, hoping I'd sounded calm and said the right thing. She moved closer to the gate, and I knew that *that*—moving forward instead of backward—meant I'd made a good move.

"Hmmmpf," he said. "I'm sure we can negotiate something a little more fair. I have nine-hundred in *cash*, right here, and—"

"No sale. You'd better stand here all day, if you want to keep us out," Eva said. "Don't let your guard down. We'll be back later. *With dates*."

I wanted to cry. I stood there, looked at her, looked at him, and nodded. He seemed more taken aback by me than by Eva—as if my endorsement meant that I'd fallen into the viper pit.

But I couldn't help but trust Eva— even though I knew she'd lied to me once. A lie by omission. A lie that only happened because I was too foolish to ask important questions.

I walked back over to the Fiero, which I'd taken pains to make look more presentable. I wanted to impress the people in the gated community before I'd known we'd be crashing a wedding.

I had known they'd judge my old car, anyway, so I'd tried hard to make her shine. I'd waxed her until she gleamed, redder than the roses in the mansion's big garden. And I'd even propped the eye-lights back open with something more sturdy than tape and zip ties.

We'd gone back to planning and plotting. We scrolled through all of the people Jelina followed on Instagram and found the name of the officiant, the photographer, the catering company, and the hairstylist and makeup team.

We made notes of all of these people, deciding who we'd latch on to. We decided to hide out with the catering folks, to slide through any gates and doors they left open as they loaded and unloaded trays and boxes.

We knew we'd have to make it back inside the gated community in a different car, or on foot, or by coming up the canal. But we knew we could manage that.

We picked out what we hoped were inconspicuous outfits — black shirts, black hose, white blouses, and little black ribbon bows. We hoped that we wouldn't look too suspicious.

Our last bit of business was our wedding gift. We went out, thirty minutes before we headed back over to the mansion, and bought a cardboard box, white wrapping paper, gold ribbon, and cigarettes. We

also bought a novelty lighter shaped like a gun, just because Eva wanted it, and I made her promise not to take it inside.

On a sidewalk in a neighborhood outside of the gated community, we prepared our gift. Eva opened her cigarettes and tossed two inside the box — "for the happy bride and groom" — and then we wrapped it, made a fancy bow out of the ribbon, and added a tag. *From family friends.*

We made it back inside. We followed the canal, picked our way into a neighbor's yard, and squeezed through some hedges.

"They don't do much to fortify the back," Eva said. "Besides the moat. They don't count on pirates like us."

I suddenly felt like Sancho Panza. *Sancha* Panza. Even so, I kept moving.

We milled around inside the yard, late-coming stragglers. We picked our way over to the catering crew, pretending to look busy, biding our time, waiting for a moment when we could catch the bride off guard. I was still holding the box — the box I'd been careful not to drop or crush, at the expense of tearing my hose. It seemed that the wedding had wrapped up before we'd arrived. The reception was about to start.

I noticed a nervous-looking man holding some sort of reflective material. He was a photographer's assistant. He was the one of the men I'd seen on Instagram, so I felt certain that I could approach him.

"Oh! Are you taking pictures of the bride now?" I asked, making sure Eva was right beside me. "I haven't seen her anywhere."

"We're about to take some group photos. The bride and her friends. Well, three of them. We can't find the other one. Probably in the bathroom. Too much whiskey."

"I know how that is," I lied. "Listen, I'm one of the bride's high school friends. So is she. I know it's silly, but we wanted to find her and give her this gift."

I cradled my nearly-empty box, hugging it more tightly than I'd hug a loaded safe.

The photographer's assistant shrugged. "Follow me."

My heart was in my throat. We followed him up the low steps in the yard, past throngs of people, past people who surely suspected we weren't supposed to be there. Eva was giddy. I was mildly apoplectic. I

couldn't stand being stared at, but Eva took it all in stride, smiling at everyone.

"Not many people are even looking at us," she said. "Loosen up. And smile at the ones who *are* looking. You look more suspicious with your shoulders up around your ears."

"*Mmmm*," I said.

"How are you going to speak when we get up on the patio? There they are! Our friend!"

Eva's voice was loud—so loud. *Everyone* on the patio looked at us, and they seemed mildly amused by the arrival of the help.

"Gift for you!" I blurted, holding the box out in front of me, unable to think of anything else to say.

"Congratulations to the happy couple," Eva said. She sounded genuine, smooth-as-honey-and-silk, even-keeled, *kind.*

"I'm sorry," she said. "Do I know you?"

“Jelina? You don’t recognize us? Really?” Eva was calm and collected. But I was about to bite my tongue off.

Jelina shook her head. “No. I don’t think we’ve met.”

“I think we need to talk,” I said. “Dis — discreetly, maybe? Can we step off to the side? I — I think Eva and I — ”

“We have some business with the bride. It’s going to be fun. I promise,” Eva said.

Jelina’s eyes sparkled. She seemed to think we were working on something. A performance, or a prank, or a big surprise. A flash mob? A cake with a naked fella in it? A new car?

“Sure, sure. Let’s use the sunroom. Wait for me, y’all — we’ll be right back!”

The bridesmaids giggled and trilled. They seemed to wonder what the big surprise would be.

“Can we leave the doors and windows open? I need some fresh air,” I said, as we walked into the sunroom. But I could already see that all the

windows and doors were open, with lace curtains that billowed in the breeze.

“Oh, you poor thing,” Jelina said. “You look like you’re going to be sick.”

“Weddings do this to her,” Eva said. “They aren’t really her thing.”

I looked at both of them. They looked at me. I nodded, after a few beats of silence.

“Now, what did you say your names were? And who sent you up here? Is this about the—”

“One question at a time,” Eva said. “Our names are Maya and Eva, and we’re here on our own business. Unfinished business.”

Jelina looked wary, uncomfortable. Before she could get in a word edgewise, Eva kept talking.

“You haven’t opened your gift. Go ahead. We’ll wait.”

I was aware of how dark the sunroom seemed, with only candles to light it up. I imagined a lace curtain floating over one of the candles, catching

fire, trapping us. We would burn to a crisp and we would get blamed, even though we didn't touch anything.

I looked at Eva, and at Jelina. I finally spoke. "It's a small gift."

"It's not a dead lizard or something?" Jelina asked.

"Oh, no," Eva said. "It's a gift for the bride and the groom."

Jelina got to work unwrapping the box. Eva kept talking.

"Now, Green Gills over here might need one, if you're willing to share. Maya, listen, I may have a few more in my pocket."

"I don't smoke," I said.

"Fine. Jelina and I, we'll have a toast with our cigarettes. You can hold a candle and still be part of the action. Give us a light."

I lit Jelina's cigarette first, and then Eva's. I gripped the candle, dumbly, willing myself not to let go of the little jar. It wasn't even hot, but my hands were clammy.

“There,” Eva said. “To the happy couple.”

They smoked in silence. Jelina kept looking at me. I knew she knew that I was the weaker one, but I also detected a sense of pity.

She was telling herself that she wouldn’t spit me up and chew me out, because I didn’t even taste good. I didn’t taste like menthols, but I also didn’t taste like an Erewhon salad. I tasted like chips from the gas station. I tasted like stale graham crackers from a public school lunchroom. I tasted like the dollar menu, or the ketchup packet crushed in the McDonald’s parking lot, and—

“Let me see the fucking ring,” I shouted. I couldn’t even believe my own rage. This wasn’t even my battle, not really. I nearly clapped my hands over my mouth, but I opened my phone’s camera instead. I wanted to make her squirm a little.

“I’m not trying to put you on the spot, Jelina. But we need to see that ring. The wedding ring. That’s the *same* ring. It is. I see it, and I know what it looks like. That’s the ring we came to see.”

I kept my camera open, aimed squarely at Jelina, with a sliver of Eva on the right corner. I wanted to film the entire exchange. “We just want to see if your granddad stole that ring from *her* granddad. It looks like the same one he bought Evelyn way back when.”

“It was a *gift*,” Jelina said. “And so was your dad’s leather jacket. To make up for all the problems they caused when —”

“It was *not*,” I said, feeling hysterical. I knew I was making it worse. I knew all the shouting might draw a crowd. “My dad told me your granddad didn’t have the money for a ring, because he lost the ring money at a Seminole casino. That’s right. So he stole this one from Charles, before he could give it to Evelyn. He had to buy a new ring and get that one engraved, but the initials inside are going to be the same. *EHD*, not *CJD*. I bet you were all too cheap to get that fixed. Probably said it stands for something like *every happy day*, or — something like that. So pull it off and show us.”

“I won’t,” Jelina shouted, but she sounded uncertain. “I just put it on. Why would I take it off so soon?”

People were coming up from the garden, pressing up against the open windows, listening to our argument.

“Jelina, it’s not your ring, and it wasn’t really your grandmother’s ring. It belonged to Charles, and it ought to belong to Eva.”

“But I was her only granddaughter! This is all she ever had to give to me,” Jelina wailed.

“All she ever had to give to you? She gave you a *mansion* by the *ocean*! Eva told me all about it. We looked at it on Google Maps before I came down here.”

“That’s gone, now. The hurricane.”

*“*It was a *bad* hurricane,” Eva said, and I realized then that I’d done all of the talking. “I remember that one. Wiped out my brother’s vacation home.”

“Just *show* us the inside of the ring,” I said, willing myself to rein it in. “We’ll leave you alone, if you can prove it’s not Eva’s.”

I was impressed by the fact that I was leading the charge. I’d done so much screaming that even more people from the garden flocked up to the sunroom to see what all of the shouting was about.

“Here,” I said, more calmly. “Let’s let your friends keep having fun. Nothing to worry about, everybody— it’s nothing major! We just need to have this conversation somewhere private, folks, and—”

I turned to the nearest door and threw it open. I didn’t realize it was a storage closet. A well-lit, private room. Probably where they stored their pickleball rackets and gardening tools. As I’d pulled the door open, we

were treated to the (unpleasant) sight of the groom's writhing backside. He was fully entwined with some lady in a champagne-colored dress. It was a dress that looked suspiciously like a bridesmaid's dress.

Eva stood up and pulled me out it the way, pinning both of us up against the wall beside the door.

"Hold it open," she whispered, and I realized I hadn't let go of my phone or the doorknob. I held the door wide open, and left the groom and the bridesmaid half-naked to the world.

The crowd was stunned. No one said anything — not even the poor young woman he'd pinned to the storage shelves.

"My God," I finally said, locking eyes with the unfortunate bridesmaid. "Stop. *Stop*. They're all getting you on video. Caught on tape!"

When it started, I was the only one filming — but I noticed several other people had their phones out and their flashlights on.

Jelina kept smoking. The groom looked sheepish *and* angry. Eva looked at me.

"*Ooh*," she said, squeezing my arm. "Here comes Mr. Davies."

He waddled up to the sunroom, ranting and cursing.

"You *bitches*— I knew it! You're horrible! You people always ruin everything! That's the only thing you two are good for."

"*You people*?" I said. "Did anyone else hear him say *that*?"

My question went unanswered, of course.

"You two need to get out of here!" He was hollering, turning purple, waving his arms. I expected him to lunge at us. I backed away, but Eva stepped forward.

"We don't have to be nice *or* good — we don't owe *you* anything. And you want to talk about being good, by the way? You're worse than either of us." Evelyn glared at the groom. "They all know about his girlfriend here. They'll tell their preachers, and they'll tell their preachers' wives. It'll be all over all the churches tomorrow morning. Shame about that, really—that you all left the Episcopalians to go to an Evangelical church in a strip mall. If they were polite Episcopalians, they'd probably help you save face. But all those gossipy old biddies won't help you now."

"*Eff you*," the groom said. He was too prim to curse, but not chaste enough to not cheat on his wedding day. "Eff you *both*. I know all about

your little grudge. Everyone here knows that you're not supposed to be here — they've been saying they'll call the police if they see you."

"Really?" I said. "If I were you, I'd shut up. You haven't even zipped your pants."

"I hope someone pushes *both* of you into a canal," he said. He had the gall to laugh. "You both ought to drown."

"We both know how to swim," Eva said. "So that won't be happening."

I turned to Jelina, and the throng behind her, their phones still aimed at the groom. "Now," I said. "We won't tell anyone else about The Incident. But you'd better not press trespass charges against either of us."

"After all the trouble we've given each other, you could get us to walk out now by getting rid of that old thing," Eva said. "The cursed ring, the ring that ruins marriages and families."

I hadn't counted on Jelina being superstitious. But she was superstitious *and* embarrassed.

"I'll give it to you if it means never having to see either of you again."

“Yes,” Eva said. “You’re going to let the two of us walk out of here with that ring. And some of that wedding cake. And we promise you’ll never see us again. Here, I’ll throw in a few cigarettes, too. You look like you need ‘em.”

Jelina frowned, turning to her friends and family. They were either yelling or filming or both. She realized, then, that no one would be coming to comfort her. “You can take the damn ring. And take the damn cake. The whole cake. I’m sick of everyone here! Just let me go back upstairs. I’m going to bed and I’ll deal with *him* when I wake up tomorrow.”

She pulled the ring off and pressed it into my hands. I held it up, examining the gold and the engraving. I couldn’t believe it. It *was* the ring. I would’ve taken it, even if it hadn’t been.

We raced back down the steps, me and Eva. We pulled the top tier off of the cake— tossing the bride and groom onto the table, carving off the marzipan frosting that looked too expensive and tasted too sweet, dropping the carefully-placed unlit sparklers onto the grass— and we put it back in a box. One of the waiters moved to help us, locked eyes with Mr. Davies up on the patio, and stepped away.

“You’ve already been paid,” Eva said. “Don’t be shy, and don’t be afraid of the old man. He’s about—”

She glanced down at her hand, at the beautiful ring she'd placed on her middle finger.

"About 5,000 dollars less wealthy tonight. He's never been a good gambler, and money isn't his strong suit. So come back here and help us."

And so the young man did, boxing up a second tier and handing it to Eva. She smiled.

"Enjoy the champagne," I shouted, as I walked back toward the canal. It didn't even occur to me that we could walk out the front gate. In hindsight, I wouldn't have wanted to. "I'd get drunk, if I could! But we have to drive all night!"

Eva lit another cigarette as soon as we got out of my car. She grabbed her head and claimed she had a mild migraine from all the shouting and from not having eaten anything besides cake.

I asked if we had any money for a pit stop at McDonald's, but we didn't have much left besides gas money, and we'd barely rolled back into Fox Creek, coasting in on fumes.

I leaned over the railing at the Lake Okeechobee overlook. Eva had taken off the ring, and we'd dropped it in a glass jar. (The jar, of course, came

from one of the tables at the wedding. I don't make a habit of carrying around glass jars. I also hadn't made a habit of stealing, but I didn't care about how it looked this time, what with all the bigger sins surrounding us.)

I looked at Eva. She looked down at her cigarette, and then turned at me, and nodded. She closed her eyes. I closed the lid, tightening it extra hard. I tossed the ring and the almost-empty jar as far into the lake as I could.

Sunlight danced across the water — little fleets of fleeting diamonds scattered everywhere. The light shimmered harder closer to the shore, and I realized that those diamonds looked more like rhinestones or glitter. Nothing too precious. Nothing that would last forever.

Someday, someone would find the ring after it had washed down the canal, all the way down to the Biscayne Bay. They would wonder which pirates had captured such a small piece of plunder, even though just about any jeweler in Miami could bring out something newer and more expensive — something that sparkled exquisitely — in a little velvet box.

The Present

a short (horror) story about giving — and taking

I can admit that I rarely handle things the right way. As I make mistakes, I feel myself being wrong. I always have the feeling that I should be doing something different, but I can't force my legs to move in the right direction, or to make my clumsy words sound more sincere. And I'm always dropping things. I'm always making apologies.

In spite of all my faults, there's one thing I take great pride in. The only thing I've ever been really good at is buying gifts.

For my father's birthday last year, I found the perfect gifts. Not one gift, but several. I couldn't help myself — I've always ended up giving him more than one gift, and this past year wasn't any different. I could always think of two or three things that he'd love to have. I ordered grilling supplies and power tools and leatherbound notebooks. My dad wasn't much of a writer, but he could always take it to the office. He always seemed to make the most of any present.

But when Mother's Day rolled around, I suddenly realized I didn't know my mom well enough to get her a good gift. I could buy her a spa basket or a set of gift cards, but that hardly seemed appropriate. It was impersonal. It would be a gift, but it wouldn't be a *good* gift.

She deserved a nice gift, but I didn't know what to get her. I couldn't imagine what she could possibly want.

I wondered if this was because my dad had more spare time than my mother, for hobbies and leisure. I don't think I'd ever seen my mother use an exercise machine or swing a tennis racket. I'd only seen her take brisk walks after dinner. She always rushed — from the laundry hamper to the washer, to the kitchen sink to the oven, from the dinner table to the garbage disposal.

I started to ponder this, but I decided not to worry about it. Worrying about her personal conundrums wouldn't solve the problem of what gift to buy for her.

It's just that I don't think I'd ever seen her sitting. It seemed that she could only stand or lie down. I wonder if she'd ever thought about just sitting down.

Could that be the answer? *A chair?*

I found a perfect faux-leather dining chair online — but it wouldn't arrive until after Mother's Day. I scrolled down the page and found a suitable

alternative: a wooden stool. It was small and backless, and it didn't look particularly fancy, but it would arrive the day before Mother's Day.

I hope it's not too uncomfortable without a cushion, I thought. *But it'll get here on time. And it's on sale!*

Where could she find a better gift? *What more could anyone want?*

Lady Quijote

I should have blocked Sally Alonso's number after our second or third phone call. I didn't, and now I'm kicking myself.

We met after she found me on 23andMe, in her dogged pursuit of members of the Alonso family — the extended family, which had scattered and sprawled all over west Texas and New Mexico.

Sally was consumed with her Spanish heritage — she was the *Oñate's foot debacle* come to life, and it just so happened that I had inherited responsibility for her. She was the Spanish foot that I had to bear, a third foot that I had to drag behind me, because I was one of the only cousins willing to talk to her. And I *was* exceedingly tolerant. I would let her kick up dust here and there — even if it got all over me.

But I wouldn't let her trample me. I couldn't let her put her foot on my neck.

We had a shared interest in environmentalism and animals, and that made our early conversations tolerable. My husband and I were trying to embrace sustainability and clean energy, and we'd come to install a small-scale wind farm on the open flatlands at the back of our ranch. The Ramos family, my family, didn't have a big ranch. But it was a ranch all the same. We were proud of our land, proud of the place we cared for. It was a part of how we saw ourselves.

It's hard for me to describe Sally Alonso, because it's difficult to sound fair. Even the most charitable description seems a bit cruel. How can I describe her without sounding like *I'm* the villain?

Throughout the day, Sally took time to burden me with endless texts — *Have you checked out that bunny tale recipe yet? Tell me if you like it!* — that I would answer with half-hearted interest.

No, Sally — but they look tasty! I knew that I wouldn't bake those cookies, or come to her house to pick up zucchini, or watch the documentaries she recommended, but I had to placate her. I had to

run interference on Sally's behalf, to cradle her feelings, to keep them from crumbling like shortbread.

I felt guilty about all of my short answers, but I knew how Sally could be. I knew how she would react if I didn't like the recipe. She was someone who had a rather clueless enthusiasm about things that didn't necessarily matter — or mirror reality — for the rest of us.

It wasn't a simple thing, like mere ignorance about the true costs of running a farm, or a lack of understanding factual information. It wasn't a lack of access to the facts, or a simple *misunderstanding* of the facts, or anything straightforward like that. It was that Sally had convinced herself that her ideas were correct, that her values were more altruistic than yours. Sally thought she was full-hearted, and maybe she was, but she was also big-headed.

It sounds cruel, but it's true. Sally Alonso was stubborn. She would have her things her way on *your* land. So when I told her about our new solar panels, she lost it. Sally despised solar farms, which she

believed led birds to get distracted and plummet to their deaths. She saw a wall of solar panels as a glittering avian cemetery.

I tried to reason with her, of course, to get her to see that the risks were low and that none of our grazing cattle would be harmed. The windmills and the solar farm would be off in their own area, away from people and animals. Away from any trees, even, because we only had one juniper tree. No one could possibly get hurt.

“We did months of research before deciding to buy some solar panels,” I told her. “We still haven’t installed them, but it’s the right thing for us.”

“Oh, I just *can’t stand* all these people, cutting down trees just to put in solar panels,” Sally said. Her voice crackled, and I could tell she was hurt. I wanted to reassure her, to let her know we would never knowingly do anything cruel.

“We won’t have to cut down a single tree, not one,” I said. “The panels will be like the wind turbines. We’ve got enough empty space out there to put up a few rows of—”

“That’s another thing I’d like to talk to you about,” she said. “Between the windmills and the solar panels, I really think the birds will have a hard time. You need to dismantle those turbines. There’s no telling how many birds you’ve personally killed. It’s violent. It’s *evil*— you know that it’s *killing* the birds.”

“Oh, well,” I said. “I haven’t noticed any dead birds near the turbines before, and they’ve been up for five years, so … I would think if it were a problem, we’d already be noticing it.”

“That’s the thing,” Sally said. Her tone was scalding, erratic, unhinged. “Maybe you just aren’t looking hard enough. Maybe *you* just *don’t care* enough.”

I went silent. I felt like I'd been slapped, but I also felt myself getting angry. I didn't know what I would say to her. What response is appropriate, when someone is questioning your ability to conduct your own business?

I suddenly realized *that* was why I found Sally annoying. Her presence was an interference. So I told her what I thought would get her off of my back.

"Sally Alonso, you're acting like Don Quixote," I said, trying to force a laugh to sound more lighthearted. "It must be that Spaniards have an innate fear of windmills!"

She was absolutely silent on the other end of the call. At first, I thought she was preparing an insult. My second thought, rather selfishly, was that I'd shocked her so badly— in pushing back—that she'd had a heart attack. I could picture her slumped over, phone on the floor, struggling to get back to—

“You are a *bigot*, Carmen Ramos,” Sally spat. I’d almost gotten used to the idea of her never speaking again, and I felt more upset to hear her voice than to hear her words.

I said nothing, and we sat in silence for at least a minute.

“You are closed-minded,” Sally finally said. “You have so much hate for Spain and Spanish history, and you can’t even deny it.”

“Sally,” I said, trying my damndest to sound kind. “Sally, my family has lived in Texas since before it was a republic. And *I’m* part Spanish, you know? I mean, you’re one of my cousins. So I feel like I’m well within my rights to make a *joke* about an old book.”

“You’re joking about my compassion for the birds. You’re also being derogatory and disrespectful.”

I almost told her that Don Quixote wasn’t real, and that she herself wasn’t acting like a real person, but I bit my tongue. I didn’t want to

be a bad person. I'm not a nice person, but I'm not hateful. And I didn't want to be hateful to my own family. For better or worse, Sally was family.

And Sally being passionate wasn't necessarily a bad thing— but this wasn't about passion. Her attitude was awful. She was dismissive of other peoples' real needs in pursuit of something more "meaningful." It felt, in some ways, like she didn't *want* to see reality.

I felt like Sally might be trying to be difficult as a way of getting attention— that that might be the only way she received any attention at all. I felt sorry for her.

But I still didn't like her.

"Sally, I — I'm sorry that anything I said made you feel that uncomfortable. But I also want to let you know you're not changing my mind about either the solar farm or the windmills. I'll be hanging up now."

I didn't wait for her answer. I just ended the call.

"*Fortune is guiding our affairs better than we could have ever hoped*," Don Quixote foolishly told Sancho Panza, the day they attacked the windmills on the plain.

Fortune, however, was on my side. A week after our phone call, Sally Alonso had attempted to dismantle another farmer's solar panels *and* a pump jack, both of which were on some politician's cousin's ranch.

Sally was almost certainly looking at some sort of felony property-damage-type charges. Her trial was set for June. I knew which date, and even which courtroom, but I didn't plan on going.

Part of me wanted to feel sorry for Sally, but I felt relief at the prospect of being out of her domineering reach. I wasn't Dulcinea. I wasn't Sancha Panza. I wasn't Rocinante— and I wouldn't let her ride me roughshod.

I was my own person. And my windmills? Well, they're not mills — they're *turbines*. But they're not so easily dismantled.

They only bend to the wind.